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The Mayers and their Song,

OR SOME ACCOUNT OF

the First of May and its observance
in Hertfordshire.

BY

W. B. GERISH.

no. 3
Hertfordshire folk lore

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THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

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IN these days when so much is done to equalise the seasons, when in the florist's, spring treads on the heels of autumn, and Christmas windows are gay with tropical fruits, when fresh meat is always on the stalls, and the earth is tapped of its light and warmth to make up for the absent sun; it is difficult to realise the delight and enthusiasm with which our forefathers welcomed the yearly miracle of the spring. It meant so much for them—release from the cold and darkness that fell hardly on all but the rich; a feast of colour to eyes weary of winter greys; varied and plentiful food to palates dulled by salt meat, fish, pease-pudding, and rye bread. No wonder that the first hint of the sun's return at Christmas, and the fulfilment of the promise of spring at May Day, were welcomed with an abandonment of joy to which our modern festivals offer but a pale parallel. It is doubtful, however, whether, even in the far-off days when the ceremonies possessed the highest religious sanction and significance, they were celebrated with a finer exuberance than in the comparatively recent times when this country was still "Merrie England." "Fetching in the May," or "Going a-maying," was then a most important festival in which people of all ranks took part. Henry VIII himself rode a-maying with Queen Catherine and his court. Every village had its May-pole, and the first of May was everywhere "the maddest, merriest day of all the glad New Year." The celebration was recognised by the Roman Church, the note for the 30th of April in an old calendar being, "The boys go out and seek May-trees."¹ Chaucer represents the whole court as going into the fields "on May-day when the lark begins to rise."

"To fetch the floures fresh and branch and blome,
And namely hawthorne brought both page and grome,
With freshe garlands party blew and white,
And than rejoyced in their great delight."²

¹ Brand's "Antiquities," vol. i, p. 217.

² "Court of Love," vv. 1431-5.

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

The poet makes the whole court pelt each other with flowers, "the primrose, the violete and the gold," but the general custom was to bring home the branches and flowers as an adornment for the house. Even the barns and the cow-houses were carefully decorated long after the primitive intention of the ceremony had been forgotten, and it had degenerated into a licensed opportunity for revelry and love-making.

The lover of old customs owes little to the Puritans, for they did their best to root them out, but he is certainly indebted to them incidentally for some valuable evidence as to those same customs, not otherwise attainable.

"What adoe make our yong men at the time of May," cries one writer of this period. "Do they not use night watchings to rob and steale young trees out of other men's groundes, and bring them home into their parishes, with minstrels playing before: and when they have set it up they will decke it with floures and garlands and daunce rounde (men and women togethir moste unsee-meley and intolerable, as I have proved before) about the tree."¹

In a recent work dealing with the Puritans in Boston, U.S.A., we are told of a certain Thomas Morton, who made himself obnoxious by his English church sympathies, and his observance of May Day customs, "which represented the phases of English life most objectionable to the Puritans who had left home in search of straighter, narrower, paths, (and it is not to be supposed that with the power to suppress, they would tolerate him); Winthorpe and his associates passed swift judgment, that he was to be set in the bilboes, and returned to England." This decision was speedily acted upon, his goods were seized to defray the cost of his journey back to his native land, and as the ship left the harbour he could behold the flames rising from his dismantled home, as it was being burnt to the ground by his implacable persecutors.

The custom of going into the woods to fetch in the May is not by any means peculiar to England. It was, until recently, very general throughout Europe, and still survives in many districts. This wide distribution at once stamps it as an ancient observance, and indeed it was already represented as such as long ago as the thirteenth century.² In some districts the branches that were brought in were fastened over the house door or upon the roof, or planted in front of the cattle stalls, a separate bush being attached for each head of cattle.

¹ Northbrooke: "Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, etc., are reprov'd," 1657, p. 140. Philpots: "The Sacred Tree," 1897.

² Mannhardt, vol. i, p. 160.

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

It now remains to trace back the ceremony—this survival—to its origin, and to show that once it was the essential outcome of a living creed, and had a serious and, so to speak, sacramental significance. There can be little doubt that the ceremony of bringing in the May arose from a process of reasoning, that the branch of May was a symbolical representation of the genius of vegetation. The gods or spirits of these far-off times had their habitation, or at least manifested their activity, in the tree. The gifts of rain and sunshine were in their hands—they made the crops to grow, the herds to multiply, and caused the race to be perpetuated. It was therefore no more unnatural for an ignorant peasantry to believe that the same power and influence existed in the cut branches of trees, than it was for our forefathers in pre-Reformation times to expect help from sacred relics. In each case the process of thought was the same. Eventually the ceremony of carrying the branches round the village, the primitive purpose of which was to make each house a sharer in the benevolent offices of the tree-spirit, degenerated into a meaningless observance, a pretext for indulging in festivities, and levying contributions. But there can be no doubt that the securing of fertility and abundance, together with the supply of rain and sunshine necessary thereto, was originally the root-idea of the world-wide spring observances.¹

Mr. Frazer, in his valuable work entitled “The Golden Bough,” states that the common European custom of placing a green bush on May Day before, or on, the house of a beloved maiden, probably originated in the belief of the fertilising power of the tree spirit.²

Referring to the beneficent qualities commonly ascribed to these genii of the woods, he³ explains how it is easy to understand why customs like the May-tree or May-pole have prevailed so widely, and figured so prominently, in the popular festivals of European peasants. In spring or early summer, or even on Midsummer Day, it was, and still is, in many parts of Europe, the custom to go out into the woods, cut down a tree, and bring it into the village, where it is set up amid general rejoicings. Or the people cut branches in the woods, and fasten them on every house. The intention of these customs is to bring home to the village, and to each house, the blessings which the tree-spirit has to bestow. Hence the custom in some places of planting a May-tree before

¹ Philpot's “The Sacred Tree,” 1897, pp. 21–23.

² Frazer's “The Golden Bough,” vol. i, 1900, pp. 196–7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

every house, or of carrying the village May-tree from door to door, that every household may receive its share of the blessing. Out of the mass of evidence on this subject a few examples may be selected. In the North of England it was formerly the custom for young people to rise very early on the morning of the first of May, and go out with music into the woods, where they broke branches, and adorned them with nosegays, and crowns of flowers. This done, they returned about sunrise, and fastened the flower-decked branches over the doors and windows of their houses. At Abingdon in Berkshire, young people formerly went about in groups on May morning, singing a carol, of which the following are two of the verses:—

“ We’ve been rambling all this night,
And sometime of this day;
And now returning back again,
We bring a garland gay.

“ A garland gay we bring you here,
And at your door we stand.
It is a sprout well budded out,
The work of our Lord’s hand.”¹

At Saffron Walden and the village of Debden, in Essex, on the first of May, little girls go about in parties from door to door singing a song almost identical with the foregoing, and carrying garlands; a doll dressed in white is usually placed in the middle of each garland.² Mr. Frazer then gives details of similar rites at Northampton and Uttoxeter.

At Watford in Hertfordshire, groups of children, principally girls, go about the streets from door to door on May Day singing some verses, of which two agree almost verbally with those which, as we have seen, are sung at Abingdon. They are dressed in white, and adorned with gay ribbons and sashes of many hues. “Two of the girls carry between them on a stick what they call ‘the garland,’ which, in its simplest form, is made of two circular hoops, intersecting each other at right angles; a more elaborate form has, in addition, smaller semicircles inserted in the four angles formed by the meeting of the hoops at the top of ‘the garland.’ These hoops are covered with any wild flowers in season, and are further ornamented with ribbons.”

¹ Dyer’s “Popular British Customs,” p. 254.

² Dyer’s “Popular British Customs,” pp. 233, 237 et seq.; Chambers’ “Book of Days,” p. 578.

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

(Mr. Frazer gives further instances from Bampton-in-the-Bush, Oxfordshire, and Sevenoaks.)

In the streets of Cambridge little girls regularly make their appearance every May Day with female dolls enclosed in hoops, which are covered with ribbons and flowers. These they show to passers-by, inviting them to remember the May-lady by paying a small sum to her bearers.¹ Mr. W. H. D. Rouse states that he has witnessed the ceremony almost annually for many years, and it was performed in the year 1900 as usual. Many of the hoops have no doll, and ribbons or rags of coloured cloth are more conspicuous than flowers in their decoration.²

Such, then, are some of the ways in which the tree spirit or the spirit of vegetation is represented in the customs of our European peasantry. From the remarkable persistence of such custom all over Europe, we are justified in concluding that tree-worship was once an important element in the religion of the Aryan race, and that the rites and ceremonies of the worship were marked by great uniformity everywhere, and did not substantially differ from those which are still, or were till lately, observed by our peasants at their spring and Midsummer festivals. Therefore it is hardly rash to infer, from this consensus of popular customs, that the Greeks and Romans, like the other Aryan peoples of Europe, once practised forms of tree-worship similar to those which are still kept up amongst us. In the palmy days of ancient civilization, no doubt, the worship had sunk to the level of vulgar superstition and rustic merrymaking, as it has done among ourselves. We need not therefore be surprised that the traces of such ancient rites are few and slight in early literature. They are not less so in the polite literature of modern Europe; and the negative argument cannot be allowed to go for more in the one case than in the other. Enough, however, of positive evidence remains to confirm the presumption drawn from analogy. Much of this evidence has been collected and analysed with his usual learning and judgment by Professor Mannhardt.³

Mr. Frazer also cites certain Greek festivals which he opines to be classical equivalents of an English May Day in olden times.

The Countess Evelyn Martinengo-Cesaresco, in her valuable work entitled "The Study of Folk Songs," 1886, says:—

¹ Percy Manning in *Folklore*, vol. iv, 1893, p. 403 et seq.

² W. H. D. Rouse in *Folklore*, vol. iv, 1893, pp. 53, 224.

³ See especially his "Antike Wald und Feld Kulte."

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

“Of English songs treating of that ‘observance’ or ‘rite’ of May to which Chaucer and Shakespeare bear witness, there are unfortunately few. The old nursery rhyme—

‘Here we go a piping,
First in spring and then in May,’
tells the usual story of house-to-house visiting, and expected largess.”

In Devonshire, children used to take round a richly-dressed doll; such a doll is still borne in triumph by the children of Great Missenden, Bucks, where a doggerel is sung, of which the concluding verses are :—

“A branch of May I have brought you,
And at your door I stand;
'Tis but a spray that's well put out
By the works of the mighty Lord's hand.

If you have got no strong beer
We'll be content with small,
And take the good-will of your house,
And give good thanks for all.

God bless the master of this house,
The mistress also,
Likewise the little children
That round the table go.

My song is done, I must be gone,
No longer can I stay.
God bless you all, both great and small,
And send you a joyful May.”

The poets of Great Missenden not being prolific, the two middle stanzas are used at Christmas as well as on May Day.

G. F. Northall, in his “English Folk Rhymes,” 1892, says :—

“These [May songs] are probably alterations—by the Puritans—of ancient May verses. The custom of ‘going a Maying’ was not confined to children. It is mentioned in Chaucer’s ‘Court of Love’ and Malory’s ‘King Arthur.’ In Fosbrooke’s ‘Encyclopædia of Antiquities’ it is stated that the Goths had also the custom of bringing in the May.”

Stubbe, in his “Anatomic of Abuses,” says :—

“Agaynst May Day . . . every Parishe, Toune and Village assemble themselves together, bothe men, women, and children, olde and yong, . . . and either goyng all together or dividyng themselves into companies, they goe some to the Woodes and Groves, where they spend all the night in pleasant pastimes; and in the morning they return, bringing with them birch and branches of trees to deck their assemblies withall . . . and then they fall to daunce about like as the heathen people did.”

Herrick’s “Hesperides” also describes this festival.

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

At Polebrook, on the last few days of April, the Queen of May and her attendants gather what flowers they can from the surrounding meadows, and call at the houses of the principal inhabitants to beg flowers, the gift or loan of ribbons, handkerchiefs, dolls, etc., with which to form their garland. This being arranged on hoops, the young maidens assemble on May-day morning, and carry it round the village, preceded by a fiddler, and a quaint song—very similar to the one used at Hitchin, and thought from its phraseology to have been written in the time of the Puritans—is sung by the Queen and her company at the different houses, a gratuity being solicited.

The garland is afterwards suspended by ropes from the school-house to an opposite tree, and the mayers and other children amuse themselves by throwing balls over it. With the money collected tea and cakes are provided for the joyous party, etc.¹

A medley of verses was sung by the mayers on May Day, 1865, in the villages of Denton and Caldecote, in Cambridgeshire, when they went round with their garland.

Undoubtedly the best description of the manner in which May Day was observed in Hertfordshire, is that given in the “Every-day Book,” under date May 1st, 1823,² by a correspondent, who says :

“On this day a curious custom is observed [at Hitchin], of which I will give you a brief account.

“Soon after three o’clock in the morning, a large party of town people and neighbouring labourers parade the town, singing the ‘Mayers’ Song.’ They carry in their hands branches of may, and they affix one either upon or at the side of the doors of nearly every respectable house in the town; where there are knockers, they place these branches within the handles; that which was put into our knocker was so large that the servant could not open the door until the gardener came and took it out. The larger the branch is that is placed at the door, the more honourable to the house, or rather to the servants of the house. If in the course of the year a servant has given offence to any of the Mayers, then instead of a branch of may, a branch of elder with a bunch of nettles is affixed to her door: this is considered a great disgrace, and the unfortunate subject of it is exposed to the jeers of her rivals.

“On May morning, therefore, the girls look with some anxiety for their may-branch, and rise very early to ascertain their good or ill fortune. The houses are all thus decorated by four o’clock in the morning. Throughout the day parties

¹ Baker’s “Northamptonshire Words and Phrases,” vol. ii, p. 424; Sternberg’s “Dialect of Folklore of Northamptonshire,” p. 181. See also Cæsaresco’s “Study of Folk Songs,” and *Notes and Queries*, Ser. III, vol. vii, p. 373.

² “The Every-day Book,” by William Hone, 2 vols., 1826; vol. i, pp. 283-284, entitled “May Day at Hitchin in Hertfordshire.”

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

of these Mayers are seen dancing and frolicking in various parts of the town. The group that I saw to-day, which remained in Bancroft for more than an hour, was composed as follows:—First came two men with their faces blacked, one of them with a birch broom in his hand, and a large artificial hump on his back; the other dressed as a woman all in rags and tatters, with a large straw bonnet on and carrying a ladle: these are called ‘Mad Moll and her husband’: next came two men, one most fantastically dressed with ribbons and a great variety of gaudy coloured silk handkerchiefs tied round his arms from the shoulder to the wrists and down the thighs and legs to the ankles; he carried in his hand a drawn sword; leaning upon his arm was a youth dressed as a fine lady in white muslin, and profusely decked from top to toe with gay ribbons: these, I understood, were called the ‘Lord and Lady’ of the company; after these followed six or seven couples more, attired much in the same style as the Lord and Lady, only the men were without swords.

“When this group received a satisfactory contribution at any house, the music struck up from a violin, clarionet, and fife, accompanied by the long drum, and they began the merry dance, and very well they danced I assure you; the men-women looked and footed it so much like real women, that I stood in great doubt as to which sex they belonged, till I was assured that women were not permitted to mingle in these sports. While the dancers were merrily footing it, the principal amusement to the populace was caused by the grimaces and clownish tricks of Mad Moll and her husband. When the circle of spectators became so contracted as to interrupt the dancers, then Mad Moll’s husband went to work with his broom, and swept the road-dust all round the circle, into the faces of the crowd, and when any pretended affronts were offered (and many were offered) to his wife, he pursued the offenders, broom in hand; if he could not overtake them, whether they were male or female, he flung his broom at them. These flights and pursuits caused an abundance of merriment.

“I saw another company of Mayers in Sun Street, and as far as I could judge from where I stood, it appeared to be of exactly the same description as that above mentioned, but I did not venture very near them, for I perceived Mad Moll’s husband exercising his broom so briskly upon the flying crowd, that I kept at a respectful distance.

“The ‘Mayers’ Song’ is a composition, or rather a medley, of great antiquity, and I was therefore very desirous to procure a copy of it; in accomplishing this, however, I experienced more difficulty than I had anticipated; but at length succeeded in obtaining it from one of the Mayers.”

At Kelshall, between Buntingford and Royston, I am informed that early in the morning of the first of May about four men formerly visited the principal houses of the village and sang a song similar to that used at Therfield.¹ When the verses were finished a bunch of may was left at each door. The men then dispersed, each man going to his daily labour. When the day’s work was over the men again gathered together, and, going through the village, called at each house where a branch of may had been left earlier in the day; of course, their avowed object was to gather

¹ See pp. 224–226.

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

alms. Generally the last house of call was the Crown Inn. Here, the song being again sung, the May Day celebration may be said to have finished.

The four men who usually formed the Mayers' party were probably the *best* singers in the village. For some time previously to the '1st' the song was practised in the neighbouring fields, and on the third Monday in April of each year the members of the Village Benefit Club met at the "Crown" for their club feast dinner. On this occasion the invariable custom was for the men to have a rehearsal of the May Day song.

Mr. R. J. Kingsley, a native of Sandon, but now residing in Nelson, N.Z., informs me that "The young men used to come round directly after midnight on April 30th and sing the song antiphonally, half taking the first two lines, the remaining half the other two. (At Christmas-time the old Christmas song was taken in the same way, all joining in the chorus.)

Next day, May 1st, they came dressed in white smocks profusely decorated with bunches of bright ribbon, tall silk hats likewise covered with ribbons, and long streamers of ribbon from the crown hanging down their backs. They brought a basket with cake, and that evening made a feast with the proceeds of their round. They left a bunch of hawthorn at the doors of all the larger houses.

Before the observance finally died out the feast had been discontinued, as it had degenerated into a mere carouse."

The Therfield custom was similar in many respects to that of Kelshall. Therfield adjoins Kelshall, but it is especially interesting, as one of the old Mayers still survives in the person of John Atkyns,¹ a farmer in that village. He kindly gave the Rector of Therfield the words of the song as he remembered it, and stated that the observance was discontinued fully fifty years ago in Therfield, but was continued later in the parish of Kelshall, and that the Mayers band consisted of four men who wore high hats, and smock frocks almost concealed by the plentiful supply of ribbons with which they were decorated. They left a bit of may at the doors of the houses during the night, and visited them, bearing a large branch, in the morning.

At Hare Street, Buntingford, the attire was similar, coloured ribbons round their hats and white smocks, but here one of the men was dressed in female attire. My informant (Miss L. Tolfts) states that "they used to sing during the night, and then in the morning they would go round to collect the money, much as the

¹ Living in 1904.

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

‘waits’ do now. This they divided, but there was no feast or anything.”

At Watford and Letchworth, in 1883 and 1893 respectively, the day was still observed by the children, who sang a mutilated version of the Mayers’ Song. The performance at Watford has already been referred to, but as with slight variations (a gaily dressed doll is usually a feature which appears to be omitted at Watford) it is still carried out at several places in Hertfordshire (at Hoddesdon, Buckland, and Wyddial, for example), I give it more fully :—

“ On May Day, in this parish [Watford], groups of children, almost entirely girls, go about the streets from door to door, and singing verses of the Mayers’ Song. They are dressed in white for preference, and decorate themselves with gay ribbons, and sashes of various colours. And I cannot find that any particular colours are prescribed by tradition. The ‘garland’ in shape calls to mind the ‘Christmas’ which used to form the centre of the Christmas decorations in Yorkshire some few years ago, except that the latter had a bunch of mistletoe inside the hoops. One of the children generally carries a purse or small bag to hold the coppers which may be collected.”

The verses in question probably supplanted earlier ones, which possessed no religious significance. When, and in what way, this change took place we can only surmise by the fact that prefixed to some editions of the earlier English versions of the Bible are some verses, of which the first stanza is as follows :—

“ Is. xx, 3, and xlix, 10. Here is the spring, where waters flow.
Rev. xxi, 6, and xx, 17. To quench our heat of sinne.
Jer. xxxiii, 15. Here is the tree where truth doth grow.
Ps. cxix, 160. To leade our lives therein.”

This is almost word for word the eighth verse of the Mayers’ Song.

The copy in the writer’s possession is dated 1608, but there were several editions prior to this in the early part of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, called the Geneva Bible. It is therefore most probable that this song was sung at least as early as Queen Elizabeth’s days. The dramatic part, and the grotesque attire, are relics of that passion for acting which was so prominent a characteristic of mediæval times.

The description of the Hitchin observance is by far the most elaborate. The performance there was of a decidedly dramatic character, and seems a mixture of mumming and maying. The Lord and Lady may be a survival of marriage by capture which is performed to-day by our children in the game called “Sally goes a weeping.” It is interesting to note that “Nuts in May,” really “Knots in May,” the well-known children’s pastime, is the May

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

Day observance reduced to the level of a game. The dressing in gay ribbons probably took the place of the floral decorations, although it was always customary for the performers to make themselves as smart as possible.

I have secured some nine variants of the song from various places in the county. Of course, they are all really modifications of one song, which it is estimated had at least twenty-five verses, although the longest version which I have obtained contains only eighteen. This is the song sung at Therfield about 1810, which was discovered in an old notebook at Buckland Rectory.¹ In addition to certain verses omitted, and extra verses added, to form these variants, many verbal alterations are found, but as these are of slight importance, rarely altering the general sense, I will not trouble to detail them here, although I have recorded all such variations.

The Therfield version is as follows :—

1.

“ Remember me, poor Mayers all,
For here should we begin
To lead our lives in righteousness,
Else we shall die in sin.

2.

For if in sin that we shall die,
What a dreadful thing it will be,
And our poor souls for ever must lie
In pain and misery.

3.

The moon shines bright, and the stars give light,
A little before 'tis day;
Our heavenly Father He calls to us all,
And He bids us wake and pray.

4.

Awake ! Awake ! good people all,
Awake and you shall hear
How Christ He died for our sins,
For He loves us so dear.

5.

So dear, so dear has Christ loved us,
He died all on the Cross ;
Oh we never, never shall do for Jesus Christ
As He has done for us.

¹ In 1903, and kindly lent to me by the Rector.

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

6.

For the life of man, it is but a span,
'Tis like any fading flower.
He is here to-day and is gone to-morrow,
And is cut down in one hour.

7.

Heaven's gates, Heaven's gates are open so wide,
The past it is so plain,
That the man who leaves off his wicked, wicked ways,
May return to the Lord again.

8.

Where is the well, that water flows?
It quenches the heat of sin.
Where is the tree, where truth it grows?
Lord, let us enter in.

9.

For 'tis when we die, if we die in sin,
And likewise so shall rise,
Our sins, our sins they will be laid
In order before our eyes.

10.

There are six days all in the week
To serve the husbandman,
The seventh, seventh day is to serve the Lord,
The Father and the Son.

11.

Our hedges and fields are clothed with green,
As green as any leek,
Our heavenly Father He waters them
With morning dew so sweet.

12.

So rise, fair maidens, to your casement,
And view the bush so fair,
And we will come some other, other day,
To taste of your brown beer.

13.

If none of your brown beer, I say,
Pray give us a little small,
And we'll be content with what we can get,
And give God thanks for all.

14.

For 'tis we have been rambling this long night
And some part of the day,
And now we are returned and back again
And we brought you a branch of may.

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

15.

This branch of may we have brought you,
'Tis both fresh and green ;
'Tis the handy, handy work of our Lord God ;
God bless our Royal Queen.

16.

God bless our Royal King, I say,
And send him long to reign,
In health, in wealth and happy, happiness,
God's Gospel to maintain.

17.

Lord ! send us peace and quietness,
The Lord send us health and grace ;
The Lord send us peace and wars to cease,
For in Heaven's our dwelling-place.

18.

Now my song is begun and almost done,
No longer can I stay ;
God bless you all, both great and small,
And send you a joyful May."

In the Therfield version, taken down recently by the Rev. J. G. Hale, the 17th verse is omitted.

In the Hitchin version, taken down in 1826, the 2nd, 4th, 5th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 16th, and 17th verses are omitted.

In the Letchworth version, taken down in 1883, the 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th, 9th, 10th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 16th, and 17th verses are omitted, but there are two additional verses :—

" Oh take a Bible in your hand,
And read a chapter through ;
And when the Day of Judgment comes,
The Lord will think of you.

Oh repent ! oh repent ! you wicked, wicked men,
Repent while you are here ;
For when the Day of Judgment comes
There's no repentance there."

In the Sandon version, written down from memory by Mr. Robert J. Kingsley, of Nelson, N.Z., the 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th verses are omitted, and verses 12 and 13 are each extended to form two verses, thus :—

" Awake, fair maid, and from your casement
Come view your bush as it stands ;
It is but a sprout, but it's well budded out.
'Tis the work of your Lord's hands.

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG

Arise, fair maid, no longer sleep,
Awake from your drowsy dream,
And step down into your dairy below,
And bring us a mug of your cream.

It is not of your nice sweet cream that we crave,
Nor the water that runs so clear,
But we ask one favour, that is, if you please,
For to taste of your strong beer.

If you haven't got no strong beer in your house
We will accept of some small ;
For we are thankful for what we can get,
And return the Lord thanks for all."

In the Watford version, taken down in 1893, the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 16th, and 17th verses are omitted, but there are three additional verses :—

" Here begins the merry month of May,
The bright time of the year,
When Christ our Saviour died for us,
Who loved us so dear.

A garland, a garland, a very pretty garland
As ever you wish to see,
'Tis fit for the Queen Victoria,
So please remember me.

I have a little purse within my pocket,
Dressed up in silk and string,
And all I want is a little piece of money,
So please to put within."

In the Barkway version, taken down quite recently by Mrs. Hudson, the 1st, 2nd, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, 16th, and 17th verses are omitted, but there is one additional verse :—

" Awake, awake, you pretty fair maid,
Out of your drowsy dream,
And step downstairs to your dairy house
And bring us a bowl of cream."

In the Buntingford version, taken down recently by Miss L. Tolfts, the 1st, 2nd, 6th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 16th, and 17th verses are omitted, but there is one additional verse :—

" There's a tuft lies at your head, dear man,
And another at your feet ;
Your good words and your good deeds
Will altogether meet."

THE MAYERS AND THEIR SONG.

In a book entitled "Songs of the Nativity," by W. H. Husk, is a carol called "The Moon Shone Bright," of which verses 1, 2, 4, 6, and 10 are to be found in the Therfield Mayers' Song. This carol, Mr. Husk says, is in the British Museum, and is entitled "A Song by F. B. P., to the tune of Diana," and is probably of the time of Elizabeth.

In conclusion, one may be pardoned for thinking it a matter for regret that old customs such as the May Day festival should have fallen into desuetude. Observances of this description serve to vary the dull monotony of life in our Hertfordshire villages, and one would welcome any attempt on the part of squire and parson to revive these almost forgotten sports and pastimes.



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